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ABSTRACT

By relating research on cognition, child development, and teaching, the author describes the theoretical background of the language experience approach to teaching reading. The close relationship between spoken language and reading and writing skills is discussed. The author lists and describes specific practices for teaching and learning in a language experience program including dictation, word banks, word recognition skills, creative writing, library usage, curriculum usage, and record keeping. Emphasized in the paper are (1) the interrelationship between reading and other communication and learning skills and (2) the importance of affective, social, intellectual, and individual factors on the reading process. References are included. (AL)

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THEORETICAL RATIONALE OF THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH

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The idea that reading is a facet of language is hardly questioned by anyone. Language is used as a means of communicating whether it be done on an oral-aural plane or on a writing-reading plane. Focusing on language as a means of communication is sound because that way meaning or understanding leads the way. Thus, when man first coded language sounds into written symbols and used them for meaningful communication purposes he was not only next to the gods but he also put writing and reading into a reverenced perspective. The scholar became a "man of letters" and learning became the "ability to read."

Undoubtedly language is a social tool, It was created by man for communication purposes and is a development stemming from social-cognitive activities refined to serve inter-acting human beings. Children learn to talk in the functional social-cognitive contexts of daily interactions through the construction and reconstruction of messages to others. Such functional communication provides an important means of attaining an end or goal response.

By analogy it can be inferred readily through the recognition of a common form and goal that children should learn to read and write under similar conditions. Undoubtedly each child's ability to see the analogy is determined to a good degree by his native ability and by his experience and by the nature of the training he receives to help him understand the process he is going through. Thus it would be extremely naïve to think of reading as a "subject"

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rather than a "process." As a matter of fact, we must avoid going from one extreme to the other and should think of the "function of reading" and the "development of reading" as almost identical phenomena. In other words it should be clearly apparent that one does not first "learn to read" and then "read to learn" but that one sees in reading, action-derived know-how that is the essence of communication.

What is Reading?

Reading is a process, a way of dealing meaningfully with printed symbols. The statement by Ernest Horn[4] in his now classic Methods of Instruction in the Social Studies is succinct and fittingly representative of what most authorities would agree to: "...reading includes those processes that are involved in approaching, perfecting and maintaining meaning through the use of the printed page." (p. 152) Add to this the interpretations provided by Arthur Gates[3] and in a sense a new dimension is provided. "Reading is ... essentially a thoughtful process ... a complex organization of patterns of higher mental processes ... and should embrace all types of thinking." (p. 3) Mortimer Adler's[1] definition provides further insight when he says that in short, reading involves the same skills as the art of discovery and that "...to whatever extent it is true that reading is learning, it is also true that reading is thinking." (p. 43) If to these definitions are added the perspectives of the semanticists (Stauffer,[11] pp. 12-16) we note that to read one must not only be concerned with scientific objectivity (systematic observation, tested assumptions, evaluated experiences) but also with the adjustment or emotional balance of people. For as C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards[6] say, "...understanding the process of interpretation is the beginning of wisdom." (pp. 50-51)

In brief, then, it appears that reading is a mental process akin to thinking. Or to state it differently, critical reading is akin to reflective or productive thinking. This allows for the fact that reading can be done for vague, unclear affective reasons and/or for unregulated thinking. Reading can be done for entertainment as well as for learning. Likewise, thinking can be either regulated or largely unregulated. When reading to learn is required, the reading-thinking process must be productive. When reading for entertainment, the reading-thinking process can be largely unregulated, varying with the amount of involvement desired.

Sound reading instruction must needs be done in such a way that pupils are taught to be productive thinkers seeking to discover meaning by maintaining an emotional balance that permits sound evaluations. At the same time sound reading instruction must help pupils cultivate a deep-seated love for reading and what it can do for people affectively.

Where to Start

How and where to start reading instruction is determined at the threshold of functional child psychology. No one has made this clearer than Jean Piaget (Language and Thought of the Child[7] and Six Psychological Studies[8]). Central to how he has proceeded and at the risk of distortion is his art of questioning. Similarly, the art of questioning is central to directing reading-thinking activities. If reading is to be kept in focus as a facet of language then it is the development of the language and thought of a child that determines when "reading" instruction should be activated. Note that Piaget's point of view features a dual role: language is not only used to communicate but also to think. Similarly, reading is used to develop language and to develop thought.

Again, at the risk of over-simplification, instruction in language and thought (reading) can begin with the very first phase of language and thought development. E. Claparede in his introduction to Piaget's The Language and Thought of the Child,[7] uses an interesting analogy when he says that the child's mind is woven on two different looms, one above the other. The first or lower loom crystallizes about a child's wants and his actions there-on, whereas the second is built up little by little by social environment.

Whatever is done, therefor, during the formative years from infancy on readies a child to deal with the printed facet of language. Acts and deeds in the home are indeed influential in shaping later pedagogical achievement. Certainly, this is not news to educators. Edmund Burke Huey[5] in his 1913 publication The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading devotes an entire chapter to the home and its influence. He discusses the child's "endless questionings," his learning the alphabet, Mrs. Scripture's use of labeling and letter writing, how to avoid "merely pronouncing words" to "the secret of it all lies in parents' reading aloud to and with the child." (p. 332) The key comment in the chapter is as follows: "The natural method of learning to read is just the same as that of learning to talk." (p. 330) Roma Gans[2] also has a chapter on the home in her book on Common Sense in Teaching Reading.

More recently experiences with Head Start, Sesame Street, early childhood education and the like have reconfirmed what educators like Friedrich Froebel and Huey and others have said. Development is a continuous interaction between a child and his environment and the quality and quantity of experiences encountered effects development. Pre-school programs are best when aimed at giving children a wide range of experiences both individual and group experiences in which they have opportunities to share with others through work and play with peers, to enjoy and appreciate the fund of circumstances

in the world about them, to extend their creative powers, and to use language freely, frequently and informally.

Of special interest is the heralded Plowden Report on Children and Their Primary Schools[9] (see references: 2 Vols.) in which the emphasis is on active pupil learning and the teacher is viewed as an organizer, catalyst and consultant for the activities. A good school is viewed as one in which children are trained to work independently in a thoughtfully planned environment that permits choices from an array of materials (sand, water, clay, wood, pets, apparatus, science equipment, pottery kilns, etc.), all kinds of reference books, dramatic encounters, inventiveness with materials, and the like. The heart of the report is Part Five which lays "special stress on individual discovery, on firsthand experience and on opportunities for creative work." (p. 187) A good teacher is one who plays a central role in setting the pace, listening, diagnosing, giving advice, introducing new ideas, words and materials, and in general mixing it up with the children, without taking over the whole job of learning from them.

"Long before a child is five," the report goes on to say, "a child is talking and communicating and oft times is familiar with books, toys, and music." "The issue is not whether he should be 'educated' before he reaches school age ..." but rather "...whether his education is to take place in increasing association with other children and under the supervision of skilled people, as well as of parents, in the right conditions and with the right equipment." "Finally there is evidence on the special needs of children from deprived or inadequate home backgrounds ... early help is also needed for handicapped children and for those with physically handicapped parents." (pp. 118-119) In summary, the report recommended that "...expanded nursery education should be available for children from three to five."

The research available, such as it is, does not provide conclusive evidence with regard to practices or procedures to be used to develop that language and thought power which will best facilitate each individual's best achievement. The overwhelming evidence, though, of experienced scholars favors developing language usage that is rich and wide ranging by means of a vocabulary conceptualized through attribute and function recognition and serving as a tool for categorization. Thus, since development in language usage and communication begins in the early years, it behooves us to provide the richest experiences possible as early as possible and on a continuous basis. And we in America should give serious thought to all of the recommendations providing for children before compulsory education made in the Plowden Report and very serious thought to recommendation (ii) "Nursery education should be available to children at any time after the beginning of the school year after which they reach the age of three until they reach the age of compulsory schooling." (p. 132)

Piaget's advice to teachers as stated in Piaget Rediscovered[10] is timely at this point. Asked to discuss development and learning he started by distinguishing between the two. "Development," he said, "is a process which concerns the totality of the structures of knowledge. Learning presents the opposite case. In general, learning is provoked by situations—provoked by a psychological experimenter or by a teacher, with respect to some didactic point; or by an external situation. It is provoked, in general, as opposed to spontaneous. In addition, it is a limited process—limited to a single problem or to a single structure. ... in reality, development is the essential process and each element of learning occurs as a function of total development ..." (p. 176) Throughout his presentation, Piaget refers time and again

to two key concepts in development and learning—action and interaction. The idea that is central to Piaget is operation which means in brief that to know an object is to act on it, to modify, to transform, to understand the way it is constructed. "An operation is thus the essence of knowledge; it is an interiorized action which modifies the object of knowledge."(p. 176) Then he discusses the sensori-motor stage of development, the operation stages and the hypothetic-deductive stage. In the operation stages, with which this discussion is concerned, there are the operations of classification, ordering, the construction of the idea of number, spatial and temporal operations, and all the fundamental operations of elementary logic of classes and relations, of elementary mathematics, of elementary geometry, and even of elementary physics.

Interaction means doing things in social collaboration, in a group effort, where children must communicate with each other, because this can lead to a critical frame of mind. In brief, "cooperation is indeed co-operation." Thus an important development among preschool children is their acquiring an awareness that another child may see something differently from the way he sees it. "So we need pupils who are active, who learn early to find out by themselves, partly by their own spontaneous activity and partly through material we set up for them; who learn to tell what is verifiable and what is simply the first idea to come to them." (p. 175) To paraphrase and adapt an idea that Ripple and Rockcastle present in their preface—teachers must lead children to the threshold of their own minds.

It seems apparent then, that in a language arts sense instruction in reading is inaugurated with the first use of language in which a child is active and creates the structures himself in order to achieve a need. It is

the total coordination of actions, of joining things togehter, of ordering things, of experimenting, of manipulating things and symbols, of posing questions, and discovering answers, of comparing findings at one time with those of another, of comparing one's findings with those of others, of eliminating contraditioncs, incompatabilities, and conflicts, of dealing with probabilities as well as certainties—it is these mental functions that serve to promote (cognitive and linguistic) maturity in reading. It is a total developmental process augmented in the classroom by "provoked situations" as opposed to spontaneous ones. In other words these are the social, linguistic, intellectual and educational factors that are fundamental.

The Eclectic Approach

The highest form of commendation a teacher can receive is to be called "eclectic." An eclectic teacher is one who uses good practices regardless of their source and adapts them to individuals according to their needs. The language arts or language-experience approach to reading instruction is best described as "the eclectic approach to reading instruction."[12] Functional communication oriented schemes, based on children's interests and capabilities, provide the foundation.

The most successful teachers in the primary grades (K-3) are the eclectic teachers who use the eclectic approach to reading instruction and avoid following the wind of fashion by commiting themselves to any one of a number of commercial schemes. They choose procedures and materials to fit the age, interest and abilities of pupils.

Even though "eclectic" is by far the most appropriate label, language-experience is the most definitive. When the term is hyphenated, as it is, it

creates a concept of relativity that gives heed to the central role of human communication: not the language and experience of an individual, as if in dichotomy, but the language-expernece dynamism of percepts and concepts actively and creatively regulated and structured by an individual according to the realities of his communication-development. Viewed this way the functional use of language-experience procedures can be as influential in reading instruction in particular and education in general as symbolic logic was in the world of science. Recently a Long Island teacher described the approach as "Reading instruction from the inside out rather than from the outside in."

In England, compulsory education is required for children when they reach age five. Many states now have made kindergarten attendance compulsory too. As already pointed out in the previous section "provoked" situations created by teachers so that a child can invent and discover and be active, can be more fruitful than haphazard ones, especially when the varied home-community circumstances of children are considered. In addition, a range of differences estimated at about five years exists among children even at this age and the range promises to increase. As the old adage says, "good teaching increases individual differences." Therefore, provoking situations at the kindergarten level may provide experiences that are more enjoyable, more fruitful and more creative than in unstructured circumstances. Everything depends on the quality of experiences. Pupils must be given opportunities to exercise their judgments, to act in new situations, to indulge their curiosity and creativity, to use their language, and to form emotional and intellectual attitudes and actions.

The stages of intellectual development described by Piaget provide a schematic description of developmental changes that occur over the years.

His stages are sufficiently open-ended to allow for the fact that children show different levels of ability, knowledge, and skills as a function of the rate, quality, and continuity of the experiences they encounter. From the sensori-motor stage through the pre-operation stage (birth to about age 4) conceptualization is dominated by the world of percepts and to a large degree the potency of physical attributes determines the concepts formed. Between age four and seven increased symbolic functioning develops and increasingly children evoke acts and deeds in thought rather than in reality. They are becoming more reflective and less impulsive, yet they tend to make judgments largely on the basis of how things look and usually in terms of one dimension. Even so they can think in terms of classes, relationships and quantity. Language development, as a part of maturation, influences much of a child's thought processes from predominately perceptual and intuitive thought to that which is conceptual and logical. Transition from stage to stage involves principally maturation, social interaction, physical activity and most important the process of self-regulation. It is to be remembered that Piaget's two critical variables in the teaching-learning experience in which children engage are, first, the idea of activity through a combination of manipulations, discovery, and verbalization; and second, social interaction or sharing whereby children are given the freedom and opportunity to reveal and share their discoveries through the bonds established between thoughts, words and deeds.

Dynamic and Meaningful Classroom Practices

The general conditions on which the use of the eclectic language-experience approach stand are sound and comprehensive. Even so it is true that classroom teaching practices across the country vary according to teacher

differences and the degree to which they grasp the underlying theories of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize practices that are common to the language-experience procedures regardless of the degree to which they are exercised.

The following list of such teaching-learning practices is not to be thought of as being in rank order. In each, the student is the pivotal point of instruction that is based on the dynamic present. In each, instruction is directed in such a way that the student is given maximum opportunity to gain understanding from purposeful participation in the processes.

Dictation: Dictated accounts of experiences that just occurred and in which pupils participated, to accounts of experiences observed or heard about, and on to stories created, provide numerous opportunities for children to see, react, think, speak, listen, read and share. Not only do the dictations provide opportunity to use language but also many opportunities to categorize objects, events, and people.

Whole class accounts serve as a base for getting started, but the best procedure is to obtain individual dictated accounts. Use of each child's language and idea structure is the important guide line. Proceeding this way uses intrinsic motivation and fosters favorable attitudes toward their language and experience and toward reading.

Word Banks: Individualized word banks are accumulated from the very beginning as certain words or all of the words in an experience account are recognized and remembered and filed in a box or bank. The word bank can be used daily for many purposes. Words in the bank can be located in different sources, can be grouped according to categories, or like beginnings, and like endings, or by size and shape, by frequency of usage and so on. It isn't really

the number of words in a bank that is important, it is what is done with the words that counts.

Creative Word Usage: Each time the children dictate they are using language creatively. Repeated opportunity to dictate is a pivotal factor. From creative use of language orally to creative use of printed words can be an easy transition.

Each child can be supplied with a word card holder and shown how to arrange words from his word bank on the holder. At first only single ideas are structured usually unrelated sentences. Gradually, though, the composing becomes more detailed and organized and begins to parallel the dictated accounts.

Pupils discover that our language is redundant, and that a syntactic order is required as well as a physical arrangement order. Words are used over and over again, and replaced in the bank. All in all this approach to creative word usage of printed words applies and develops composing acts or "composition writing."

Word Recognition Skill: How unfortunate it is that not all of the essential practices of learning to recognize and use printed language could be presented simultaneously. Because our language is discursive it must not thereby be allowed to impose a discreetness on the teaching.

From the moment a child first attempts to read a dictated account he is faced with the need for word attack skill that goes beyond semantic and oral language usage recall. Accordingly phonetic and structural analysis skills are taught intensively from the very beginning.

Children who can speak provide ample evidence that they have an ear for sound. Auditory-discrimination capitalizes on this wealth and proceeds to make

the children articulate so they can use phonetic skills deliberately. Some training can be activated on the very first day of school.

Progress is measured by rate of achievement and instruction is paced accordingly. Some discreetness and some overlap results as the word attack skills embrace auditory-visual discrimination, letter substitution, vowel keys, structural variations and dictionary usage.

School and Classroom Libraries: The power base on which the language-experience approach rests is the degree to which pupil language is linked to the reality of daily living and communication. It must be equally as clear that the power base on which reading skill is refined and extended is the school and classroom library.

As Hazel Adams said, the library becomes a place where a child may on any day take out and return books. It also becomes a center for information, a place for leisure time reading and browsing, a place to discuss books and films and music, and a place for a story hour.

The language-experience approach requires a substantial classroom library in each room. It becomes the axis for the room in a physical sense as well as in a curriculum sense and in a reading sense. It becomes a place to do scholarly things—to search for answers, to make notes, to read to self and others, to listen, and so on. In brief the library is the keystone of the reading-learning communication arch and the mecca to which all pupils turn daily.

Creative Writing: In many ways the label creative writing is not sufficiently descriptive of the varied writing activities children engage in through the eclectic approach. Many of their writings are accounts of experiences rather than imaginative plots. So the content may be fiction or nonfiction, imaginative or documentary, expository or narrative. The stimulus

may have been selected by a teacher, a pupil, a group, or a class.

Writing, in turn requires certain capabilities. Handwriting skill is needed, knowledge of letter names, some knowledge of phoneme-grapheme relationships and some know-how about letter order in words. Practice in handwriting is scheduled as a daily activity and from the beginning of school. In spelling, it is the order of letters within a word that distinguishes one written word from another. So consonant substitution and vowel variability produce considerable precision in making children articulate about the use of specific letters to represent specific sounds and especially the blending of sounds into words. It is astounding how often the phonological spelling children do as they write is an exact reproduction of dictionary phonetic-respellings.

Once children start writing they do so at every opportunity. Even so, time is schedule dor teaching. What is needed are many opportunities for the children to deal with their own ideas.

Curriculum Usage: There are a multitude of things, persons and places for children to talk, read, and write about. Yet selected stimuli from curriculum areas are a superb source and serve a rich dual purpose. Similarly current event occurrences are almost equally as rich. If it is remembered that reading is a process then understanding why the school curriculum is so integral a part of reading instruction follows naturally.

Record Books: Each dictation can be placed in an individually owned booklet, dated and arranged in chronological order. This provides a pragmatic accountability of progress and achievement not only for oral language usage but reading ability.

Stations and Seating: The classroom organization for effective use of the language-experience approach can best be called prototypical of multi-unit, ungraded, open-door teaching-learning organization. The geography of

of a single room can be quite flexible. The library is the hub of the room, pupil seating can be arranged around it in clusters of three or four, and beyond the pupils, activity areas are placed. Centers or stations or the like can vary from listening posts to reflecting stations to concept centers.

Other Practices: As is apparent this brief accounting required time and space and is not all inclusive. Equally as apparent should be the richness and variability of the actions and responses that participation stimulates and requires. Some other practices that warrant mentioning, at least, are oral reading and listening activities accomplished by both pupils and the teacher. Close home and school collaboration is helpful because school successes spill over so quickly. Critical reading instruction is done in group situations in which each member of a group is dealing with the same material.

Above all, though, and throughout each of the activities there occurs what might be said to be the most essential and rewarding set of actions that are a part of the language-experience approach—the activities of sharing. There are numerous opportunities to share on a person-to-person, person-to-group, person-to-class, or person-to-other classes basis. Some of the sharings are self-regulated, others are class or teacher regulated. Some sharings are formal, many are informal. Always the goal is to know and to know so well that others can be taught. Thus, the learning-teaching cycle becomes a functional reality and the actions thereof facilitate understanding, memory and use.

Conclusion

The purpose of all this is to teach children to read, to write, to talk and to listen and in the process create a love for language usage in

general and reading in particular. The eclectic approach as described utilizes the language-experience-cognitive wealth that children possess. As discussed, any child who can talk has a language wealth (phonologically, syntactically, semantically) that is astounding. The experience wealth is proportionately equal in qualtiy (even though varied) to his social-cultural-economic background. Cognitively the maturation characteristics of the operational stages is a source of neuropsychological affluence. The intent, of course, is to capitalize on and at the same time strengthen the bond between word and action and thought, between reading and writing and communication, and between directed thought for egocentric and sociocentric purposes.

In brief, communication of ideas constitutes the principal crystallization of school life—intellectually, affectively, socially and individually. Interests, values, sympathies and respect develop mutually. When a child works alone, his conduct is distinguished by persistence and concentration and, when in a group, by regard and collaboration. The children are learning to appreciate points of view of others and to coordinate them. In the process they are assimilating different ordinates and coordinates intellectually and affectively.

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